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ABSTRACT

Principals are expected to be instructional leaders but generally lack the time and training to assume such a role. Several theories and research studies suggest alternative views of the principal's role in providing instructional leadership. Ethnographic studies of principals show that principals spend little time on evaluation, instruction, and curriculum. One researcher found that administrators at the secondary level are almost wholly concerned with discipline and leave instructional matters to the discretion of teachers. The theory of substitutes for leadership might be used to strengthen the potential for leadership in positions other than that of principal. Substitutes for leadership, as applied to education, are those factors that influence the instructional process and render formal leadership problematic. Another approach to leadership emphasizes the provision of support functions (such as supervision and technical assistance, incentives, commitment to an innovation, or monitoring of student progress) rather than the principal's role. Some researchers envision the principal as a buffer who provides resources and maintains an orderly atmosphere. They see attempts by administrators to directly supervise teaching techniques as counterproductive. Personal characteristics give few clues to leadership ability, though some studies have found that a principal's gender may have an effect on leadership style. (WD)

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# The Principal's Role: How Do We Reconcile Expectations with Reality?

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"The principalship was born in an environment of chalkdust." This observation, made by Dan Lortie of the University of Chicago, illustrates one of the ironies in the evolution of the modern building principal—once a teacher with no training in administration, the principal is today an administrator who may have a very limited knowledge of the technology of teaching. And yet, as a result of the recent writing on effective schools, researchers, administrators, teachers, parents, and principals themselves expect those in the position to exercise instructional leadership.

Putting aside for the moment the problem of whether or not principals are trained, or should be trained, as instructional leaders, it must be noted that, despite its widespread use, the term *instructional leadership* defies explicit definition. A review of the literature and conversations with a dozen researchers have failed to yield a consensus. Some interpret instructional leadership in its widest sense to include any function that promotes the efficient and orderly operation of schools, such as the management of discipline, the physical plant, and resources. Others use the term to encompass a narrower range of activities—teacher supervision and evaluation, staff development, and implementation of change efforts.



Robert Mattson, director of CEPM, takes a position in the middle, defining instructional leadership as providing clarity to the organization of the school—clarity of goals, of functions, and of interrelationships. He describes the principal not as a master of technology, but as one who knows sources, connections, and networks. In contemplating the principal's responsibilities, Mattson remarks,

> The primary function of the principal is to articulate in a clear and potent manner the discrepancy between the existing status of schools and the preferred status of schools. The staff must recognize the differences that exist between real and ideal and the differences must matter.

This article does not offer a definitive interpretation of instructional leadership. Rather it attempts to point out some of the misconceptions resulting from an indiscriminate and indeterminate use of the term to describe what principals should be doing. In addition, through a discussion of pertinent research, it suggests alternative views of the principal's role in providing instructional leadership.

Recent and ongoing studies of the principal's role can be ranged along a theoretical continuum that links approaches to leadership through the personal interaction of principals and teachers at one extreme and through a more

general view of management functions in schools at the other.

Ronald Edmonds, in his Search for Effective Schools Project, concluded that effective schools "have strong administrative leadership without which the disparate elements of good schooling can neither be brought together nor kept together." The quest for strong administrative leadership often leads to a prescription of the personal qualities of the principal: social and interpersonal skills, goal orientation, level of energy, confidence, and use of power. The personal approach has gained substantial support from professional administrator organizations and has received extensive coverage in educational journals.

***The principal is today an administrator who may have a very limited knowledge of the technology of teaching.***

The other end of the continuum is represented by researchers who believe that principals are constrained in their ability to exercise leadership by several factors: external controls and mandates, the characteristics of schools as loosely coupled organizations, and the unlikelihood that the typical administrator will possess all of the attributes that describe the ideal principal.

These scholars identify sources of instructional leadership in locations other than the principal's office. Some concentrate on functions that benefit instruction, others on the characteristics of teachers and schools that coopt the principal's authority, and still others on the concept of a leadership team that includes the principal as one member.

Mattson stated the need to recognize the differences between the real and ideal conditions of schooling. Correspondingly, this examination begins by contrasting the real and ideal activities of principals.

### Absence of Leadership

The literature on effective schools, including the writings of Ronald Edmonds, Michael Cohen, Wilbur Brookover, Jean Wellisch, and David Armor, points out the importance of the principal's role in maintaining order, acting as an agent of change, setting clear objectives, conveying high expectations for student achievement, offering support and guidance to teachers, providing public rewards and incentives, and spending time in classrooms.

Most educators and scholars agree that these functions represent the preferred model of principalship. However, ethnographic studies of principals' actual daily routines, beginning with Harry Wolcott's *The Man in the Principal's Office,* have demonstrated that principals do not in fact spend a substantial amount of time attending to "instructional" activities. The type of leadership being exercised by most principals is not being exercised in the classroom.

Excerpts from a speaker's comments transcribed by Wolcott at a monthly meeting of a local principals' association illustrate the discrepancy between what principals do and what they, and everyone else, profess they should be doing.

***Principals do not in fact spend a substantial amount of time attending to "instructional" activities. The type of leadership being exercised by most principals is not being exercised in the classroom.***

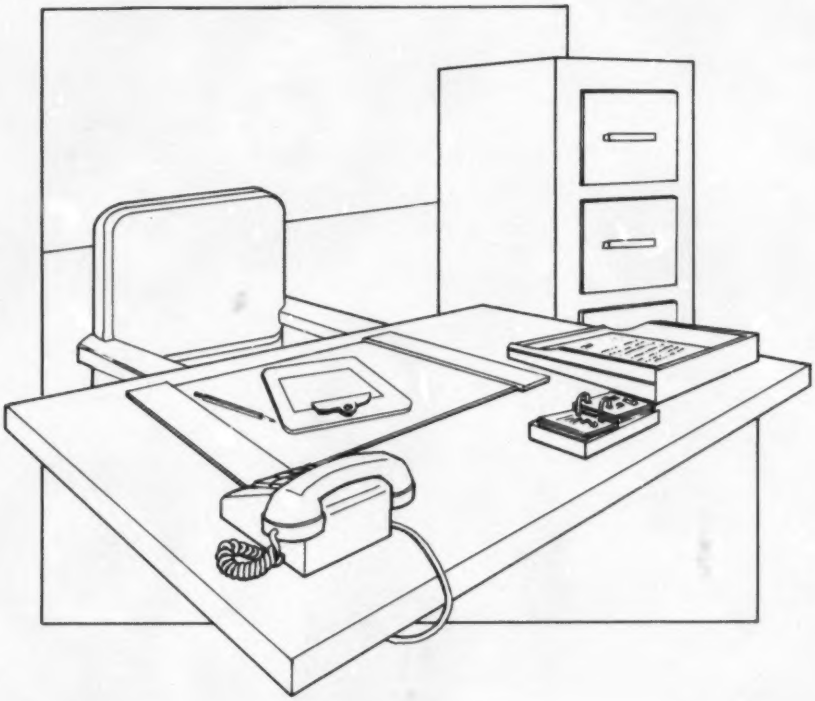
> We aren't doing what we should be doing. We never seem to have enough time . . . when I started as a principal, the assistant superintendent advised me, "Harold, 75 percent of your time should be spent in evaluation, instruction, and curriculum." I couldn't even do it then. Today, it's reversed. I don't spend 25 percent of my time with the people who are handling the instructional program.

*The Center for Educational Policy and Management (CEPM) has maintained a continuing interest in instructional leadership as part of its investigation of variations and possibilities in the effective administration of schools. This interest is evidenced by the Center's research agenda. One of the three current research programs examines administrative leadership and the context in which it is exercised, including the shaping of that context by collective bargaining. Moreover, CEPM's summer conference this year will treat the effects of collective bargaining on the principal's role with respect to instructional leadership; the conference will draw together experts in labor relations as well as in educational administration. Finally, much of the past and ongoing work of the Center, as discussed in this article, has scrutinized the role of the principal and its influence on instruction.*

Philip Cusick of Michigan State University asserted at a recent CEPM seminar that principals and vice principals spend almost all their time maintaining order in the schools. He reached this conclusion after "living" in two midwestern high schools, one urban and one suburban. Because of the emphasis on preserving discipline and an orderly atmosphere, which Cusick says administrators have learned to do very well, teachers have been left to make decisions on curriculum in conformance with their own preferences.

In the schools Cusick observed, the result of this set of circumstances was that the teachers often taught subjects very different from those listed in the official curriculum and used the rationale that they were providing "what was good for the students." The teachers left each other alone, recruited for classes that reflected their own special interests and often carried on second jobs within the school building. The schools were characterized by a complete lack of coordination and a refusal to address important educational issues. (This characterization is an extreme example of loose coupling, which is used to describe schools at both the elementary and secondary levels.) Yet, Cusick cautions, many of the teachers were dedicated and effective, and the students who were able to choose courses wisely (or whose parents could help with such choices) were receiving a good education.

However, those students not receiving an adequate education under those conditions were primarily from low-income, minority families. Thus a failure in administrative leadership was handicapping those most needing the opportunities afforded by an equal education (a theme reiterated by Edmonds, Douglas Carnine, and Russell Gersten).



**Substitutes for Leadership**

In pondering the problem of why principals do not function as instructional leaders, some educational researchers, including CEPM's Nancy Pitner, have turned their attention to the theory of substitutes for leadership advanced by Steven Kerr of the University of Southern California. Kerr's theory suggests that one reason for the lack of strong administrative leadership in schools is that persons other than the principal, and functions other than those of the principal, influence the instructional process. If educators are concerned about improving the instructional programs of schools, they must work backwards to identify the main determinants of the program. It is these determinants that Kerr refers to as substitutes for leadership. He has identified fourteen characteristics of the person, the task, and the organization that render formal leadership

problematic. They include a staff member's ability and knowledge, need for autonomy, professional orientation, and indifference toward organizational rewards; the degree to which a task provides its own feedback concerning accomplishment and is intrinsically satisfying; and, in the organization, the presence of formalization, highly specified and active advisory and staff functions, rewards not within the leader's control, and spacial distance between superior and subordinates.

If properly strengthened, these alternative factors that affect teacher performance might substitute for hierarchical administrative leadership. However, these factors are not now uniformly productive in all schools.

Pitner, who directs CEPM's Research-Based Training for School Administrators project, is currently conducting a field test of the concept of substitutes for leadership on a small sample of schools in Oregon. She remarks that principals participating in her training program are not asking for assistance with their role as instructional leader. Most requests for workshop topics are concerned with technical skills, such as conflict management, complying with PL 94-142, discipline, and decision-making.

***One danger of emphasizing the principal's instructional role is to make most building administrators feel guilty for not accomplishing what they are supposed to be doing.***

One danger of emphasizing the principal's instructional role, Pitner believes, is to make most building administrators feel guilty for not accomplishing what they are supposed to be doing. She suggests "creating another slot in the administrative hierarchy" to provide real instructional leadership, perhaps through the co-principalship, in which two administrators share responsibility, one for instruction and the other for community relations and finance. This system is presently being used in High Point, North Carolina. Another alternative is more differentiated staffing among subordinate administrators (vice-principals, counselors, department heads) and more levels of responsibility.

**Looking at Support Functions**

Gersten and Carnine, both affiliated with CEPM, concur with Pitner's view that instructional leadership can be shared among subordinates. However, they envision technical assistance (not generally provided by the principal) as being of paramount importance to instructional improvement. They argue from their study of 15 inner-city schools that, in implementing educational programs, it is more effective to focus on support functions (the essential activities that need to be performed) than on who performs these functions or on the mystique of instructional leadership. They have found, contrary to the findings of Edmonds, Gene Hall, and Paul Berman and Milbrey McLaughlin of the Rand Corporation, that the principal may not play a central role in increasing the instructional effectiveness of schools. In defense of their conclusion, they cite a 1981 study that documented the effectiveness over a 13-year period of the Direct Instruction Follow Through program in a school in one of the poorest ghetto areas in New York City. The program was successful despite indifference or outright opposition from the seven principals who successively served at the school. More recently, they report,

***It is more effective to focus on support functions than on who performs these functions or on the mystique of instructional leadership.***

> Similar findings come from our own prior research in a large urban district, which demonstrated how an educational change effort was successfully implemented over a two-year period in the district's seven poorest schools. The effort was widely hailed as a great success—within the school and throughout the community—primarily because of unexpected, dramatic gains in academic achievement. Interviews with teachers in six of the seven schools overwhelmingly indicated that the building principal was perceived as irrelevant to the implementation process, and the success of the program was consistently related to high levels of concrete technical assistance on day-to-day classroom matters.

The two researchers agree with Wolcott and Cusick that most principals cannot function as instructional leaders because of their training and the copious

demands placed on them. What principals can do is to ensure that certain requisite activities are carried out within the organization.

Gersten and Carnine identify four elements that lead to successful implementation of effective educational programs. These elements, or support functions, include (1) giving teachers consistent, constructive information on their quality of instruction and providing high caliber technical assistance as needed; (2) offering support and incentives to teachers who implement the program; (3) ensuring that a supervisory staff member from either the school or the central office demonstrates a visible commitment to the innovation; and (4) establishing a system for monitoring the progress of all students through the curriculum.

These functions represent a synthesis of the literature on implementation of validated programs. Gertsen and Carnine maintain that the support functions can be performed by a variety of school or central office staff members, including a principal, master teacher, curriculum specialist, department head, or outside educational consultant. They stress that the principal's primary responsibility is to see that the functions are accomplished.

In a recent CEPM paper, Gersten and Carnine posit four reasons why emphasizing support functions constitutes a more fruitful approach to educational effectiveness than concentrating on leadership or the principal role.

- Functions are easier to define, operationalize, and measure. They are observable events.
- Sociological theories and models of leadership consistently fail to explain which schools are effective and do not account for the weak linkage between data on leadership and student achievement.
- The principal does not serve as an instructional leader in reality; therefore it is more reasonable to use a team approach that includes supervisors, teachers, and curriculum specialists.
- The analysis of support functions gives a greater sense of coherence to studies of educational innovations.

**Indirect Approach to Leadership**

While Gersten and Carnine give precedence to support functions over the person who performs them, other researchers focus on the principal's indirect effects on the conditions for learning. Dan Lortie, who spoke at a seminar last summer sponsored jointly by CEPM and the National Institute of Education, remarked that principals' prestige with faculties depends on their ability to obtain

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# Alaska Project Trains Leadership Teams

The state of Alaska's ongoing efforts to increase schooling effectiveness are of import to those considering the issue of instructional leadership. In January 1981, Governor Jay S. Hammond appointed a 13-member task force to study effective schooling in the state. In cooperation with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), the task force examined research on effective educational practices and combined their findings with a knowledge of schools in Alaska to produce a number of specific recommendations.

Instructional leadership is being highlighted in this project, with the result that NWREL is currently developing a model for leadership team training. The training program will incorporate effective practices validated by prior research studies.

Robert Blum, director of the project, states that each team will consist of a principal, who serves as team leader, two or three selected teachers, and a representative from the district's central office. The model will be implemented in a pilot program during the 1982-83 school year. A total of six Alaskan schools will participate initially, two in each of three districts.

As an early effort to put to use research-based findings on effective schooling, this project should capture the attention of educators across the country.

For further information about the project, readers may contact Robert Blum at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 300 S.W. Sixth Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97204.

the necessary resources. Teachers look to the principal for protection (particularly from the threat of public intervention or criticism) and in exchange give the principal their loyalty. Lortie sees this relationship as a reenactment of the medieval social structure in which protection

***Teachers look to the principal for protection. . . and in exchange give the principal their loyalty.***

(buffering) is traded for cooperation. The principal, then, to extend Lortie's analogy, must provide resources and support to sustain a strong, cooperative fiefdom.

Brian Rowan, associate research scientist for the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, also feels that one of the principal's most significant functions is to act as a buffer or facilitator for teachers in the classroom. In this role the principal is responsible for controlling classroom disruptions, providing smooth organizational processes, ensuring the availability of resources, acting as middleman in disputes between parents and teachers, maintaining an orderly atmosphere, and handling student discipline.

Rowan, who recently met with CEPM staff members to discuss the instructional management role of the principal, is working with Steven Bossert, principal investigator, David Dwyer, and Ginny Lee to investigate the principal's role in instruction by focusing on school-level factors that affect the coordination and control of the teaching program. The researchers believe their work will fill two gaps in previous studies—the failure to examine the interconnections among important features of the school's organizational structure and the lack of knowledge about how certain managerial practices influence children's schooling experiences.

In constructing a model for their study, the researchers have identified the structural characteristics most influential in effective schooling as time on task, class size and composition, grouping, curriculum, evaluation, and task characteristics. The study will also collect data on classroom and school climates and on the leadership behavior of principals.

In his meeting with CEPM staff, Rowan expressed doubts that principals have a direct effect on student achievement, except perhaps through teaching or interacting extensively with students, which are comparatively rare functions for building administrators. Rather he perceives that principals affect the learning process indirectly through their influence on school climate and instructional organization. He and his colleagues are, in fact, pursuing an indirect model of instructional management. Rowan argues that principals can set up a series of constraints on teacher work (structurally) without working directly with teachers. He is not claiming that this is a preferred role for the principal as much as he is attempting to reflect reality and to point out that principals can have an effect on student achievement through avenues other than the direct supervision of teachers. According to Rowan, the indirect approach to instructional management offers principals the advantage of requiring less time than direct supervision. One decision about the ordering of the school structure can have a large impact upon the instructional process.

**Relevance of Personal Characteristics**

The preceding discussion has treated the effects on instruction of principal behavior. One perennial question raised by educators and researchers alike is whether it is possible to predict leadership effectiveness on the basis of ascribed characteristics. From a review of the literature on principal effectiveness, Ray Cross concluded that personal characteristics give few clues to an administrator's ability to lead successfully. Whereas many researchers concur that the age, training, and personality types of principals seem little related to

***Teachers appreciate principals who consistently emphasize educational objectives . . . however, attempts by administrators to directly supervise teaching techniques appear to be counterproductive.***

their on-the-job behaviors, one group of studies has yielded evidence that a principal's gender may have an effect on his or her

leadership style. Andrew Fishel and Janice Pottker in their 1975 review of such studies concluded that

> female principals, compared with males, concern themselves more deeply with instructional leadership and affairs of classroom teaching, interact more intensively with the faculty, attach greater importance to administrative tasks, use a more participatory (or "democratic") approach to school decisions, and exercise closer supervisory control of teachers.

However, in analyzing data from the Management Implications of Team Teaching (MITT) project, which utilized questionnaire responses from over 300 classroom teachers in nearly 40 schools, W. W. Charters, Jr., a CEPM researcher, and Thomas Jovick found that male and female principals did not differ in the closeness with which they supervised teaching performance. Hence the implications of gender for instructional leadership remain open.

### The Effects of Close Supervision

Even if principals were inclined and had the time to closely supervise teachers, doubts exist concerning the positive effect of such supervision. In a study of 20 elementary schools in Los Angeles to identify school and classroom policies most effective in raising reading scores of inner-city children, David Armor and others found that teacher flexibility was an important characteristic of the successful schools. According to their report,

> Students' reading achievement was reduced where teachers felt that their reading instruction was expected to conform closely to the school's reading program guidelines. Conversely, the more that teachers were encouraged to adapt or modify the reading program, on an individual classroom basis, the more their students increased in reading achievement. These effects of teachers' flexibility in program implementation were quite strong . . . of course, there is a limit to this finding: When teachers are completely independent in deciding how to teach reading, then there is no school-wide program, and the school policies are irrelevant to classroom outcomes.

Furthermore, Charters concluded from his work on the MITT project that teachers are unlikely to respond positively to close supervision, especially in schools where most teachers are teamed and work closely together.

Their point is supported by a 1977 report on the principal's role and teacher morale under varying organizational conditions by Elizabeth Cohen, Russell Miller, Anneke Bredo, and Kenneth Duckworth,

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associate director of CEPM, who found that in schools characterized by collaborative teaching, teacher morale is positively affected by principal supportiveness, but negatively affected by direct supervision. However, the research findings indicated that in schools where teachers are isolated, direct supervision may be more readily accepted.

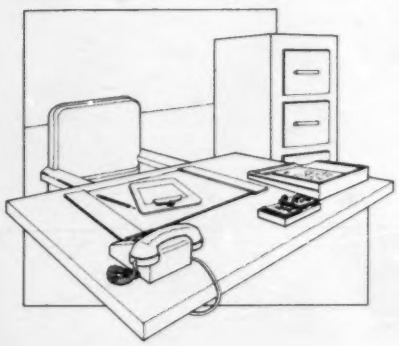
Perhaps the important distinction to make regarding supervision is between stipulating the goals of the instructional program and dictating the means by which those goals will be accomplished. Teachers appreciate principals who consistently emphasize educational objectives and who offer support and resources for attaining those objectives. However, attempts by administrators to directly supervise teaching techniques (the means) appear to be counterproductive.

**Conclusion**

The intent of this discussion is not to intimate that principals' attempts to influence instruction are fruitless or that instruction is not a proper concern for principals. Even those who question the ability of principals to personally affect the learning process have suggestions for ways principals can better manage schools to improve student learning, and most researchers fall somewhere toward the middle of the continuum linking the personal and functional approaches to leadership.

Even though Ray Cross maintains that the literature does not support a view of the principal having much control over variables related to student outcomes, he argues strongly for the importance of a leadership style that blends task orientation and a concern for people. Elizabeth Cohen observes that principals, especially at the elementary level where they have few formal sanctions, can influence teachers through the use of warmth, praise, and the offering of resources.

Clearly, the research does not offer a prescription for making principals more effective. In every case leadership must adapt to circumstances. However, it seems evident that any accurate vision of the principal's role must encompass both the person and the structure, both the existing conditions and the ideal. While researchers may dissect the principal and his or her work for greater understanding, the component parts must ultimately be reunited to reflect the complex interrelationships that operate in the administration of schools.



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